

Exploring information experience using social media during the 2011 Queensland Floods: a pilot study.

SHARON BUNCE, HELEN PARTRIDGE AND KATE DAVIS

Abstract

Social media networks have emerged as a powerful tool in allowing collaboration and sharing of information during times of crisis (Bruns, The Centre for Creative Industries Blog, comment posted on January 19, 2011). The 2011 Queensland floods provided a unique opportunity to explore social media use during an emergency. This paper presents the findings of a pilot study that explored the information experiences of people using social media during the flooding of the Brisbane River. Analysis of data from four interviews supported the emergence of four categories of information experience. Examination of the categories revealed variation between the way in which individuals experienced social media and the point of the flooding at which each category of experience occurred. Information regarding individual's use of social media has the potential to inform the development of social media platforms that can provide relevant and accessible information for the general public in event of a natural disaster.

Introduction

In December 2010 and January 2011, vast areas of Queensland were extensively affected by flood, with over three quarters of the state being declared a disaster zone (Queensland Government, 2011). Initially Central Queensland communities along the Fitzroy and Burnett Rivers suffered significant damage. This was followed by flooding events in South East Queensland along the Condamine, Ballone and Mary Rivers. Unforeseen flash flooding inundated Toowoomba and the small communities of the Lockyer Valley, Brisbane.

Previous research has revealed that during periods of crisis, information dissemination and seeking have become compelling issues (Lu, Case, Lustria, Kwon, Andrews, Cavendish & Brenikki, 2007, 709). Furthermore, the internet has become a predominant means of communication among victims, experts, volunteers and agencies (Lu, et al 2007, 709). The 2011 Queensland floods required information to be made available quickly and accessibly to the public. The emergence of online social media as a means of collaborating and sharing information assured its position as a vital element in warning and bringing relief to Queenslanders affected by the floods (Bruns, The Centre for Creative Industries Blog, comment posted on January 19, 2011).

This article presents the findings from a qualitative investigation of the information experience of individuals using social media platforms during (and following) the 2011 Queensland Floods. The research focused upon residents of Brisbane City and surrounding suburbs who resided in areas affected by the event and who had regular access to social media tools during this time.

The results of the research revealed that variation exists between the categories of information experience and that each category encompasses particular information behaviours, practices, and activities that fall outside of either information behaviour or information practice. The emergence of four categories describing specific ways in which social media may be experienced was identified and the meaning and focus of each category were defined.

This research constitutes a pilot study, and therefore the findings are preliminary in nature. It should be acknowledged that the limited sample size prevents the construction of firm theory from the categories of experience observed. As further research exploring information experience and social media use is undertaken, the categories of experience identified in the study will be more firmly established, additional categories of experience may be uncovered and firm theory regarding information experience may be constructed from the data.

A Brief Review of the Literature

A review of the key literature relevant to this study is presented below. This is a brief review and is not intended to be exhaustive, focussing upon the concept of information literacy and its relationship to social media and how social networks have featured in emergency management.

Information Literacy

The research undertaken in this study involved developing an understanding of the participants' information experiences in social media during a natural disaster. This phenomenon is closely linked to the concept of Information Literacy where individuals use information to learn and, as such, become informed learners (Bruce, 1997). Bruce, Hughes, and Somerville (2011) suggest that as an informed learner, an individual is aware of their information use and experiences and the many different ways in which they can engage with information. Similarly, an informed learner appreciates the transformative character of information and information literacy (in Bruce, 1997; Lupton, 2008; Lin, 2010). Embodied in information literacy is a specific way of knowing through learning in order to engage with the landscapes that constitute...our everyday lives (Lloyd, 2005, 580).

Lloyd (2005, 579) proposes that information literacy is both a process and a practice that is subject to both social and cultural influences. Accordingly, the process of becoming information literate is influenced by social, physical and textual relationships with information that [in fact] requires a range of information practices (Lloyd, 2005, 571). Savolainen (2007, 120) identifies the social emphasis of information practice when he suggests that it shifts the focus away from the behaviour, action and skills of individuals and links them to membership of groups and communities. The information experience of individuals using social media platforms encompasses these relationships, as information takes many forms in an online environment and is produced and communicated through multiple modalities (Mackey, 2011).

Information literacy has been described using a constructivist approach, where it is seen in terms of attributes of persons and focuses on personal qualities of the individual apart from the environment (Doyle, 1992). In contrast, a relational approach portrays information literacy in terms of conceptions and focuses on personal qualities of the individual in relation to the environment (Bruce, 1998, 26). Adopting Bruce's (1997) 'relational' view of information literacy, allows us to focus on the phenomenon itself, as it is experienced by people interacting with [social media] (Bruce, 1997, 39). In this instance the focus is neither on the person, nor the object of interest, but on the relationships or conceptions between them (Bruce, 1997, 40). Such conceptions influence the way in which a task is accomplished and the attributes used in accomplishing it (Bruce, 1997, 40).

Lloyd and Williamson (2008, 5) identify the importance of context in relation to information literacy. Whilst information literacy can be witnessed across educational, workplace and community settings, the focus of the phenomenon varies according to the context. With a focus of the information experience of individuals using social media, the current study constitutes a study of community information literacy. In the wider community, people need to use information to learn for everyday life purposes in a wide variety of contexts (Bruce, Hughes, & Somerville, 2011). In engaging with information in a community setting, whether they be seeking, retrieving, using, or sharing, an individual's information literacy is (rather than just a text-based literacy) a social and physical experience with information (Lloyd & Williamson, 2008, 7).

Recent research suggests that social media environments and online communities are innovative collaborative technologies that challenge traditional definitions of information literacy. Mackey and Jacobson (2011, 62) propose that social media environments are transient, collaborative, and free-flowing, requiring a comprehensive understanding of information to critically evaluate, share, and produce content in multiple forms. Within this context, community information literacy takes on a unique character, in that it involves the formation of Web 2.0 communities based on a particular set of values or characteristics.

Social Media

With the growth and evolution of Web 2.0 technologies, social media has emerged as a platform for collaboration, sharing, innovation and user-created content (Lai & Turban, 2008, 387). Boyd (2008, 211) defines social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with which they share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. Social networking platforms enable individuals and groups to share ideas and information (Boyd, 2006), by posting, replying, re-distributing and re-posting information that is most relevant among their peer groups (McCusker, 2011). Such information can entail the sharing of experience through photographs, video, music, insights and perceptions (Lai & Turban, 2008, 389). Perhaps crucial in times of crisis, social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, provide space for in-depth social interaction and community formation and tackling collaborative projects (Bruns & Bahnisch, 2009, 7). The social networking sites YouTube and Photobucket facilitate interaction through the sharing of photographs, video footage and graphics. Facebook, MySpace and Twitter enable conversations to occur between friends and communities, in addition to the posting of visual medium.

Social media platforms enable users to establish new connections and communities and extend established offline communities. However research suggests that most social network sites support pre-existing social relations (Boyd, 2008, 221). With the expansion of the role of social networking sites in communications during times of disaster, the opportunity exists for an increase in new relationships between (otherwise unknown) producers and consumers of information.

Social media and emergency management

In the wake of recent disasters the need for accurate and timely information in a time of emergency has become self-evident. The provision of information, resources, and knowledge to citizens prior, during and following the onset of a natural disaster can facilitate community engagement (Tolhurst, Australian Broadcasting Commission Podcast, 2011).

Peer-to-peer communications through social media, such as social networking sites, are growing as a means for supporting additional, often critical and accurate dissemination of information within the public sphere (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008.). Similarly, the public has begun to rely on social

media to share information during emergencies with family, friends and increasingly, with government and aid organisations who maintain social networking profiles (American Red Cross, 2010).

Public communication through social media platforms played a vital role during all phases of the 2011 Queensland floods – from warning, to emergency, and – eventually – to recovery, relief and rebuilding (Burgess, 2011). Over a two month period of December 2010 and January 2011, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) Facebook page served as a primary channel of emergency communication, as citizens were able to access, post and share information about road closures, flood peaks, and other such disaster response issues (Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (CCI), 2011). Similarly the QPS Twitter hash tag #qldfloods was an effective means by which information could be spread widely and rapidly, emerging as a vital element in warning and bringing relief to Queenslanders affected by the floods (CCI, 2011). In times of crisis, members of the public can leverage their own social networks to find and provide information outside the official response effect and to make critical decisions about, for example, heeding warnings and making plans to evacuate (Mileti, Bandy, Bourque, Johnson, Kano, Peek, Sutton, & Wood, 2006).

Research Approach

The research was conducted using Grounded Theory, a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in peoples' lives (Glaser, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006) and is suited to investigation that is concerned with understanding phenomena (Glaser and Strauss, 2006). Using the Grounded Theory methodology, the researcher simultaneously collects and analysis data, to develop new theories, rather than verifying pre-existing theories.

The research adopted the constructivist approach to Grounded Theory, where the interrelationship between the researcher and the co-construction of meaning is emphasised (Hayes and Oppenheim, 1997, 20). Constructivism as applied to Grounded theory is underpinned by the assumption that the researcher constructs theory as an outcome of their interpretation of the participants' stories (Mills, Bonner and Francis, 2006, 3). Given that the unique and local focus of the research was not supported by previous theory, the adoption of the constructivist Grounded theory approach, where a theory can be constructed from the researcher's interpretation of the data collected was most relevant.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken using semi-structured interviews, in which participants were asked an initial question prompting them to share their experience using social media during the floods. Secondary questions were asked to delve further in order to extract rich data. Formulation of the questions commenced after an examination of questions used in previous grounded theory research (Tilley, Bruce, Hallam, & Hills, 2006; Durrance, Souden, Walker, & Fisher, 2006; Lloyd, 2006; Lipu, Williamson, & Lloyd, 2007). Questions selected for use in the study included:

- Can you tell me about your experiences with using social media during the recent floods?
- Why did you use social media?
- At what point did you decide to engage with social media?
- Can you tell me how you participated?
- What sorts of things did you use to learn about the floods?
- Can you tell me what you did with the information you found?
- Can you tell me about your thoughts or experiences when you used social media?

- Can you tell me about how your understanding of the flood crisis changed (if at all) as a result of your experiences with social media?

As the investigation constituted a pilot study and was therefore preliminary in nature, the research questions were evaluated throughout the data analysis process, to determine if they yielded rich data.

Participants

Four participants were selected to be interviewed in the data gathering process of the project. Recruitment took place by means of a Queensland University of Technology staff e-List and by word of mouth. The group consisted of 3 females and 1 male and were aged between 28 and 42. It was predicted that this number would yield sufficient data to support the initial emergence of meaning from within the participant's experience. As the investigation was concerned with the nature of social media use during an emergency, convenience sampling was employed to ensure that participants were aware of social media. However whilst all participants had experienced social media, the frequency of their use varied considerably.

It was the intention of the study to select participants who resided within an area of Brisbane that was affected by the floods. In such instances, participants (or relatives of participants) needed to have either suffered property damage or have resided in an area where property was damaged as a result of the flooding event, whilst still being able to access an internet connection. It was predicted that this may limit the type of participant to one who could access the internet through a mobile device.

Data analysis

The aim of collection and analysis of data within a grounded theory methodology is to pursue the most plausible theoretical explanation for the data (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, 3). Using this approach, the collection and analysis of data may take place simultaneously, as early data analysis can inform subsequent data collection (Willig et. al, 2008, 5). The data was analysed through a process of memo writing and reflection, in order to evaluate the interview approach, the ability of the interview questions to provide data and to identify any potential categories and relationships between them. The process of Initial Coding was used to break down and compare the data in order to locate similarities and differences (Saldana, 2009), to discover categories of experience for each participant and to draw comparisons between the experiences of the participants. Data was coded on a line by line basis and along with the writing of memos, informed the discovery of four categories of description.

Results

Analysis of the results revealed four different categories describing the experience of participants using social media during the floods. These categories represented a range of information behaviours and practices that were undertaken for a variety of reasons. Commonalities and variation were evident in why participants used social media and how they made use of social media.

Given the number of participants interviewed for the study and the preliminary nature of the study, the categories described were viewed as preliminary and suggestive in nature. The authors acknowledge that increasing the size of the sample is necessary in order to firmly establish each category and to construct theory from the categories.

The four categories uncovered as part of this research were:

Category 1: Information experience incorporates monitoring information

Category 2: Information experience incorporates community and communication

Category 3: Information experience incorporates affirmation

Category 4: Information experience incorporates awareness

Category 1: Information experience incorporates monitoring information

Meaning:

In this category the information experience of participants involved the ongoing monitoring of news regarding the flooding event for the purpose of staying informed.

Realisation:

In this category, individuals used their social media networks for the purpose of staying informed about the flooding event or satisfying their curiosity. This was experienced in a solitary manner, in that it did not facilitate or involve communication to others outside of the social network itself. However monitoring of information within a social network may occur within already established social network communities or alternatively, could facilitate the expansion of these communities or participation in a new network.

Participant 2 (p. 4): The information that I got from YouTube wasn't informing in that I found it to be important in my experience of the floods in terms of how I reacted, what I did, what I contributed. I think perhaps it was more on the curious level.

Use of the term *accessing data* (by the participant quoted below), to describe finding information about the floods, highlights the nature of her social media use.

Participant 3 (p.1): Essentially I thought social media seemed to be a lot better way of getting the data immediately and it was more accurate. What was on the television channels was sort of very focussed on Rosalie, whereas the news that was coming through on Twitter seemed a lot more relevant, for example when flooding first started in Westend, there were actually Tweets coming through on that as Westend was the first area affected and pictures were attached by something like Instagram or something like Flickr and so there were these accurate pictures coming through at the time and this lead up to the flood in Southbank and the same thing. The other thing I noticed was that there was a police Twitter account Queensland Police Service Media and a lot of material was coming through on that so accounts like that became authoritative sources and they got retweeted on Twitter.

Dimensions:

In this category, individuals engaged in the practice of information browsing through social media networks and information consumption. The monitoring experience seemed to occur in social media networks that enabled the posting of small chunks of information that could be immediately consumed or re-posted.

Category 2: Information experience incorporates community and communication

Meaning:

In this category information experience was necessitated by the need to communicate with individuals or organisations in matters relating to the flooding event.

Realisation:

In this category, the focus was upon an individual's perceived need to communicate with others. This may involve communicating through an established social networking community.

Participant 4 (p.2): My brother could go down to my Grandad's house, take photos and communicate once to get the message around to a lot of people and that saved me ringing him, my mum, ringing my aunt, ringing my Grandad and telling them all what's going on; it's all there. For me it was more convenient and handy.

Alternatively, the experience may involve communicating physically with others, using information that had been sourced from a social media platform.

While established social media networking communities were not necessary for communication, this category frequently involved reliance on these groups. Communication with established social networking communities may involve harnessing expertise from members within the community itself or from an extension of that community.

Participant 2 (p. 2): The other way I found social media really useful is in sourcing information expertise about how to handle certain things. I had a couple of people come to me because they knew of my experience in information science and libraries saying that they had recovered photo albums and stamp collections and they wanted to know what they had to do to restore them and bring them back to a form that was worth keeping. My skills and knowledge were not in that area and I didn't know what to do. I used my Twitter community (my personal learning network) to put out a call to people to respond with information about either other people that could help or information online I could share with those people to get them on the right path. In both cases I got response within twelve hours. That community responded so quickly and with so much care (wanting to make a contribution) and that was a significant moment for me in assessing the value of the social media.

Dimensions:

The very nature of this category necessitated that individuals engaged in the practice of information sharing, either as a recipient or the 'holder' of information. As the holder of information, an individual may have also engaged in the behaviours of information seeking and gathering.

Category 3: Information experience incorporates affirmation

Meaning:

In this category the participant's information experience involved the seeking of affirmation or assurance.

Realisation:

In this category the emphasis is on using information that has been obtained through social media use to gain assurance. Assurance may be sought in regards to the safety and/or location of family or friends or in relation to property and the threat of damage that may have occurred as a result of the flooding event.

Participant 2 (p. 2): [We were using social media] to communicate to other members of the family that each was ok. We did spend some time accounting for family members because obviously in the Grantham area there were quite a few people that were lost, so we used social media to communicate between family members who were on social media in Brisbane.

Participant 1 (p. 4): We were looking for images, looking for ways to see what was happening and I found a website the *Westender* (a little newspaper). There was someone who had been going around taking masses of photographs. So we were actually able to go and to find via the *Westender*, a Photobucket site, where he was giving us a visual representation of the damage that had been done.

Alternatively individuals may use social media platforms to provide assurance of their own safety to their families and friends, both locally, interstate and internationally.

Participant 1 (p. 7): The social media I was using was to reassure them, to let them know that I was ok, to let them know what was happening with other people, because they were seeing these images on the screen and without being able to put them into context and in a personal sense for them, I was the context.

Dimensions:

In this category individuals may experience the practice of information sharing through the posting of verbal updates or photographs. Alternatively this category of experience may involve the practice of information seeking as individuals search for information to share with others rather than sharing information that they already know. Information seeking may also occur to facilitate self assurance that an individual's property is safe.

Category 4: Information experience incorporates awareness

Meaning:

In this category the participant's information experience involved the development or expansion of their awareness of the flooding event.

Realisation:

The development and expansion of an individual's awareness through social media use was governed by their particular expectations and information requirements and, as such was unique to each individual participant. Although the desire to expand awareness was not always a conscious decision, specific reasons for using social media for this purpose include:

- To understand how the flooding had affected the workplace and an individual's ability to go to work.

Participant 2 (p. 1): In regards to the workplace, I was finding information coming directly from the organisation was not regular enough and so I relied on (in addition to information coming from email and the websites I looked on), Google maps. I tried to look on Twitter and communicate with other staff about when the office would be closed, when it would be open, or where else we could work in the meantime. So particularly Twitter in that case, was useful.

- To be equipped to provide accurate information to people affected by the floods who were unable to access information.

Participant 2 (p. 3): Social media allowed my awareness to expand. Obviously the information I got from my family was not informed; they did not know what was going on. They did not have electricity and they couldn't see it on the news or anything. I was informing them of what was happening. All they knew is that they couldn't get out of their street. The information they were passing to me was not new or informing. It was actually the other way around and it was social media that allowed me to be specific with them.

- To develop a sense of how the flooding event had affected Brisbane and areas outside of an individual's immediate experience

Participant 4 (p. 1): So for me there were a few issues. One was how I was going to back to Brisbane because we were isolated at the beach so I used the police traffic updates on Facebook to find out when roads were reopening. The problem at that stage was Gympie; the highway was closed at Gympie so I had to keep updated about that.

Dimensions:

In this category, individuals may experience social media through the practice of actively seeking new visual or text-based information, or they may encounter the information through browsing comments posted on social media networks.

Discussion

The Grounded Theory methodology stipulates that through a process of initial and focussed coding and memo writing, researchers can identify tentative categories and their properties, define gaps in data collection, and delineate relationships between categories (Charmaz, Henwood, 2008). Whilst the sample size and preliminary nature of this research prevents the researcher from identifying any firm theory, variations between categories have been identified. Furthermore analysis of the data has revealed that commonalities do exist over each category.

It emerged from the data that the 2011 flooding event was viewed by participants as having three distinct phases. The research found that in each category of description, the experience of individuals using social media was influenced by the phase of the flood in which the engagement with social media took place.

The pre-flooding phase commenced as participants became aware of the Toowoomba inland flood and the effect that would have upon the Brisbane River. This phase included the period of time between the initial inland flood and the flooding of the Brisbane River itself. In the pre-flooding phase the information experience of participants using social media occurred to facilitate communication and to develop awareness (Categories 2 and 4).

The second phase encompassed the period of time between the actual flooding of the Brisbane River and the time when the water levels began to recede. The seeking of assurance (Category 3) emerged as a reason for participant's social media use during this phase. This ranged from feeling assured that your property had remained intact or unaffected, to assurance that family and friends were safe and out of any immediate danger.

Participant 4 (p. 2): ... because I couldn't go over there, my family took a lot of photos and put that on Facebook. Grandad couldn't get over there either because he is elderly and there was still a lot of water in his back yard and there was mud and we didn't want him to trip over. So my aunt took a lot of photos of the house and put them up on Facebook to share them with family and friends.

The category of monitoring (Category 1) was evident in the experience of participants during the second phase of the flooding. Analysis of the data revealed that one participant's experience using social media centred largely on monitoring the event once the Brisbane River had flooded. Whilst they had relatives who resided in suburbs that flooded and she herself worked in an organisation that experienced considerable flooding, her activities using social media emphasised her role as an observer and an 'isolated consumer' of information.

Participant 3 (p.1): Essentially I thought social media seemed to be a lot better way of getting the data immediately and it was more accurate. The other thing I noticed was that there was a police Twitter account (QPS media) and a lot of material was coming through on that, so accounts like that became authoritative sources.

Category 2 (the experience of communication and community in social media use), emerged as yet another way that participants experienced information during the second phase. In this instance social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Email, and message boards were used, for as well as facilitating written communication, the participants were a part of networking communities within these platforms.

During the second phase of the flooding participants sought to establish and expand upon their awareness (Category 4) of the event and its implications. The social media platforms used during this phase to develop awareness included those that enabled the posting of photographs and videos thereby enabling participants to see the water and the damage that had occurred.

The final phase commenced once the waters began to recede and continued until the participants felt that it was no longer necessary for them to use social media in respect to the 2011 floods. During this phase participants were still seeking assurance from family members and friends as well as providing assurance of their own wellbeing through their social media use (Category 3). However as participants became more aware of what had occurred, the process of informing others of their own safety became more frequent.

Category 2 was evident in the experience of participants during the final phase of the flooding event. Communities that had been established or expanded as a result of the flooding event were frequently cemented during this phase as participants selected whether to keep following or to "de-friend". One participant's experience was centred on a strong and established community, in the sense that she had a large group of people and organisations that she followed and who followed her. The onset of the Brisbane floods and her need to stay informed drove her to expand her list of followed organisations to include QPS Media and Crisis Commons. Expanding her community in this way expanded her awareness of the flooding event.

Participant 3(p. 1): The people I started to follow during this time – I stuck with them. People like QPS Media and Crisis Commons and the Cyclone updates. I also picked up QUT researchers who were doing some interesting things with media analysis.

Communication with work colleagues also emerged as an important need that was met by social media use during the final phase. One participant's building was declared unsafe after the floods and as she was unable to gain access to her place of work (for three months after the event) she

Participant 2(p. 2): ...relied on personal relationships through social media and was able to use those relationships to maintain some connection.

Whilst the overarching influence of the three phases of the flooding event represents a commonality between the four categories, it was found that variation also exists between each category. Variation was evident in how the information experience was driven between the categories (i.e. the stimulus for engaging with information) and the information behaviours and practices that are evident within each category.

- Regularity of use varied between the categories of experience. Variation in the regularity of use ranged from isolated incidents to multiple experiences using social media each day. Categories 2 and 3 were undertaken most regularly and on a continual basis, whereas category 4 facilitated less regular use, consisting of isolated activity. Category 1 seemed to occur on a regular basis but over a period of time that was specific to each participant.
- Variation existed between the information practices and behaviours employed within each category. The behaviour of information seeking appeared to be a part of experience in categories 2, 3, and 4. Monitoring (Category 1) encompassed the practice of browsing, rather than deliberate seeking. The practice of information sharing was evident in the Categories 2 and 3.
- Variation existed in relation to which phase of the flooding event each category of experience is evident.
- A degree of variation was evident in the social media platforms used within each category. Analysis of the data revealed that what participants considered to be social media also varied. The current intertwining of different forms of media, invites varied delineations of what constitutes social media. Further research is needed to understand the variations in social media use across a variety of platforms.

Future directions

This study provided an initial insight into the information experience of individuals and their social media use during a crisis. It is intended that the results from the project will be used to inform the design of future research.

The research also identifies the existence of the different stages of a crisis and the variation in social media requirements that exists within each phase. Recognition that social media is used at different times and for different reasons may influence the information needs of individuals and the way in which they interact with the information.

The findings are potentially useful for organisations and government departments that are responsible for providing relevant and accessible information (via social media platforms) for the general public before, during and following any such event.

It is predicted that through further research, the establishment of firm categories of description would foster the emergence of theory that could be used to inform the development of social media communities that adequately cater for the needs of individuals at a time of natural disaster. The authors acknowledge that the focus of this study lies in the information experience of individuals who have access to social media and the technology that can facilitate this type of media. Future insight could be gained from contrasting this experience with that of individuals who have no access to information communication technologies and social media networks.

Conclusion

This paper has presented the findings of a pilot study that explored the information experience of individuals using social media during the 2011 Queensland floods. Examination of the literature revealed that whilst there has been some quantitative research conducted into social media use during natural disasters, there have been little qualitative research undertaken that explores the information experience of individuals and their social media use.

Studies exploring information behaviour and everyday information practice are evident in the literature, however this research proposes that whilst the information experience of individuals using social media does include information behaviours and practices, it encompasses the activities of collaboration, information monitoring and browsing. Further research is required to enable the drawing of firm conclusions in this regard.

McCusker (2011) tells us that social network platforms enable us to post, reply, repost and redistribute information that is relevant amongst our peer groups. The results of this study have revealed that individuals may engage in a range of information practices and behaviours, including information sharing, browsing, seeking, gathering and consumption.

Preliminary research findings have identified four categories which reflect variation in the way in which social media is experienced. Whilst this information highlights the potential for social media to facilitate engagement amongst communities during times of emergency, the results of the initial study could not be considered to be representative of the community as a whole. Further research employing a larger and more diverse sample size would be needed to firmly establish the categories and construct theory that is grounded in the research data.

The recent Queensland floods saw the rapid expansion of the social media profiles of the Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Police Service. This research has the potential to inform organisations and government departments in the development of their social media platforms so that they can provide relevant and accessible information for the general public in event of a natural disaster.

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Sharon Bunce is a recent graduate of the Masters of Information Technology (Library and Information Science) from Queensland University of Technology and Bachelor of Education from Melbourne University. Her professional interests are social media and its application in corporate and library contexts and community information literacy. Sharon Bunce may be contacted at sharonbunce@gmail.com

Professor Helen Partridge is based within the Faculty of Science and Technology at the Queensland University of Technology. Her research intersects the technology, learning and information. In 2011 she was a visiting scholar at the Oxford Internet Institute at the University of Oxford where she undertook a study into people's information experiences in Twitter. She is currently leading a national project exploring the way people use information to learn about their health. Professor Partridge's publication can be accessed at http://eprints.qut.edu.au/view/person/Partridge,_Helen.html

Kate Davis is a Lecturer in Library and Information Science at the Queensland University of Technology. Most recently, her professional experience relates to online collections and services management in the public library context. Her teaching and research interests centre on the applications of technology to library service provision, particularly in the public library context, virtual reference service provision, and corporate use of social media. Kate is currently a PhD student and her doctoral research is focussed on the information experience of new mothers in social media spaces.